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Preparing for College Theatre

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VIEWPOINTS

Preparing for College Theatre

ABE J. BASSETT

The most significant characteristic of the department of theatre arts at Wright State University is that it has chosen to be a comprehensive but exclusively undergraduate department. Because the twenty faculty and professional staff are graduates of universities who offer advanced degrees, we are all aware of how an undergraduate student can be pushed aside in favor of the older, more mature graduate student. This is, in part, the reason for the deliberate decision to teach undergraduate students only.

Our 210 majors choose from among three degrees (B.F.A., B.A. and B.S. in Education) and nine programs of study: Acting, Directing/Stage Management, Design/Technology, Theatre Arts Management, Theatre Studies, Theatre Education, Theatre/Dance, Motion Pictures History and Motion Pictures Production. In 1980, more than 38,000 persons saw our productions. Over 150 nights of performance were held in the new Creative Arts Center, which houses two theatres. The department has six studios for acting and dance classes.

Our typical incoming freshman is enthusiastic about studying theatre after having experienced theatre and some degree of success on the high school level. In the main, the typical students are highly motivated, very competitive, and do not have serious inhibitions about studying singing and dance. Intellectually, they are being taught to question ideas and concepts intelligently and with a probing mind. "When they do not understand a concept," writes a directing teacher, "they usually express that confusion in a reasonable way by asking questions which can illuminate their difficulties in sorting through the material. He goes on to say that our majors are capable of sustaining a productive discussion while at the same time remaining tolerant of the points of view of other students.

On the other hand all faculty decry and bemoan the freshman's lack of writing skills. Whatever the area of expertise, our faculty demand that students be able to express themselves clearly and cogently. "The usual complaints about bad grammar usage and poor compositional skills are all true," writes one of our faculty, "but an unhappy variation is that those students who have been drilled in proper English composition, sometimes write stiff or convoluted prose, which is grammatically correct, but without a sense of naturalness." This faculty member goes on to say that the bottom line is that "trained or not, they are not being taught to be able to say what they want to say clearly."

Concomitant weaknesses are poor reading skills and lack of exposure to both representative dramatic literature and to what we would term the liberal arts. "I

would gladly trade their theatre training,” said one faculty member, “for a general familiarity in other liberal arts. We can teach them theatre, but we cannot also teach them basic skills and assorted other disciplines.”

The design faculty want incoming students to have a better background in art, especially drawing, and several faculty concurred with this designer: “I am constantly amazed by students who are surprised by the serious attitudes we have about our discipline.” Finally, an acting teacher felt high schools give too much emphasis to a musical comedy style of performance.

How can the high school student get better prepared? Our faculty unanimously suggests that the high school teacher require more written communication. The students should take “more essay examinations,” and teachers should “encourage exercises that groom imagination and creativity rather than stressing the finished product.” Again, our entire faculty wanted students to be better read in general. They should take every opportunity to see more plays and to be exposed to the arts—film, dance music, and the visual arts. The broader the student's background, the better the student is served.

Both acting and design teachers offered the following suggestions:

“Try to give students a sense of how much hard work is involved in the profession, not just how much fun it is to act. Somehow students need to be made aware of the fact that the arts are difficult and demanding and they need to approach it seriously.”

And finally, to come back to the main theme, the *basic* is this: “Teach them how to write to people and how to talk to people. Make sure they understand how to outline their thoughts on paper and then write a coherent, clean, understandable, and meaningful five-page paper.”

Our students are often surprised to discover that the theatre faculty values writing ability. What we have experienced is that there is a most definite link between the ability to write well and the ability to think well. Thankfully, we also know that writing is a learned skill, not a quality or trait inherited or magically acquired. Since students can learn to write, we suggest that more stress be placed on writing at the high school level, so incoming freshmen may start their college careers at a higher level, and thus, hopefully, end their college careers at a higher level.